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Source: *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter, 1997), pp. 32-45

Published by: Middle East Institute

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4329021>

Accessed: 30-10-2017 05:49 UTC

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# ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY: TOWARD A RECONCILIATION?

Metin Heper

*Turkey's democracy has been consolidated by the inclusion of the religiously-oriented into mainstream politics. This was facilitated by the increasing secularization of the Turks that made support for a radical religious revival less likely, and the increasing moderation of the worldviews of the religious groups themselves.*

**T**he Refah Partisi (Prosperity Party, RP)<sup>1</sup> obtained the plurality of votes in Turkey's December 1995 general elections. In June 1996, the RP and the center-right secular True Path Party (TPP) formed a coalition government, and the RP's leader, Necmettin Erbakan, became prime minister for the first two years of the coalition. These developments caused consternation among many in Turkey, but, unlike the situation in Algeria, the military did not lift a finger to prevent them. Everybody, including the military, accepted the legitimacy of a government led by Erbakan. How has this uneasy marriage between democracy and Islam in Turkey been possible?

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1. Refah Partisi is often translated into English as the "Welfare Party." As the party primarily aims to provide for the welfare of the people by increasing the overall wealth in the country as well as by a more just distribution of that wealth, the "Prosperity Party" rather than the "Welfare Party" seems to be a more accurate translation. In addition, in Turkish *refah* brings to mind first and foremost prosperity rather than welfare.

In order to address this issue, we need to look at the relationship between Islam and democracy in Turkey from a historical perspective. Bernard Lewis has found some aspects of Islam incompatible with liberal democracy.<sup>2</sup> Lewis has observed, however, that of the 46 states which were members of the Islamic Conference in 1993, only one, the Turkish Republic, could be described as a democracy in Western terms.<sup>3</sup> Earlier, Lewis had expressed a guarded optimism about the future of democracy in Turkey:

Twice before, in the course of their history, the Turks have set an example and served as a model for others—under the Ottomans, of militant Islam; under Kemal Atatürk, of secular patriotism. If they succeed in their present endeavor to create, without loss of character and identity, a liberal economy, an open society, and a liberal democratic polity, they may once again serve as a model to many other peoples.<sup>4</sup>

To use Juan J. Linz's terminology, in Turkey democracy has become the "only game in town;"<sup>5</sup> no group with political influence and/or power, including the military and a great majority of the religiously oriented groups, would prefer an authoritarian regime to a democracy.<sup>6</sup> Islam, on the other hand, has been integrated into Turkey's democracy in a myriad ways, while constitutional and legal secularism have been kept intact. Religious orders, movements, and sects have had representatives in the secular political parties as well as in the RP. On the other hand, Turkey's 1982 constitution, not unlike the previous 1961 constitution, stipulates that Turkey is a secular state and that this particular provision in the constitution cannot be repealed. The Constitutional Court can be activated by the president and by the political parties if these constitutional provisions are violated. In 1971, for example, the Court banned the Milli Nizam Partisi (National Order Party, NOP), also formed by Erbakan in the previous year, for using religion for political purposes. Ultimately, the military constitutes the major deterrent to the establishment of an Islamic state in Turkey.

The consolidation of democracy in Turkey, including the successful inclusion of the religiously oriented groups, has been a consequence of an interactive relationship between Islam and democracy. In the 19th century, Islam was given short shrift as a source for public policymaking while some key ideas of democracy were allowed to flourish. From 1923, when the Republic was founded, until the mid-1940s, democracy itself was gradually established. While people's religious feelings were respected, Islamists, defined here as those who wish to see Islam play a greater role in the society and/or the polity, were not permitted to have their own political organizations. From the mid-1940s to the present, as democracy became consolidated, Islamists have been increasingly reincorporated into the political system. This was helped by a gradual change of attitude on the part of the bulk of the Islamists from an anti-regime stance to a pro-regime one.

2. Bernard Lewis, "Islam and Liberal Democracy," *Atlantic* 271 (February 1993), pp. 89–93.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

4. Bernard Lewis, "Modern Turkey Revisited," *Humanities* 2 (May/June 1990), p. 11.

5. Juan J. Linz, "Transitions to Democracy," *Washington Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1990), p. 158.

6. The point about the military's unwillingness to intervene once again draws upon the views of the last three chiefs of the general staff, reported in Metin Heper and Aylin Güney, "The Military in the Third Turkish Republic," *Armed Forces and Society* 22 (Summer 1996), pp. 619–42.

*THE IMPACT OF SECULARIZATION ON TURKISH IDENTITY, 1920s-90s*

The consolidation of democracy in Turkey and the gradual reincorporation of Islam into politics were facilitated by the increasing secularization of the Turks, after the establishment of the Republic in 1923, which made general support for a radical religious revival less likely. Even more critically, the increasing moderation of the worldviews of significant religious groups rendered those groups less of a threat to the secular democratic state.

Reforms during the early decades of the Republic aimed at removing the pervasive hold of Islam on society and the polity.<sup>7</sup> Some of the steps taken in this direction included the removal from the constitution, in 1929, of the provision that Islam was the religion of the state. From 1933 until the late 1940s, the courses on religion in primary schools were dropped. From 1934 to 1947, the *haj*, the Muslims' pilgrimage to Mecca, was prohibited. Western dress and headgear were adopted after 1925, and people were obliged to take surnames in 1934. Education was couched in the scientific terms of the West, and an alphabet of Latin origin was substituted for the one of Arabic origin after 1928. Sunday, instead of Friday, was made the day of rest in the mid-1920s. The lunar calendar was dropped, and the Gregorian calendar, which had been adopted in 1917 alongside the lunar calendar, became the only valid calendar in 1925. The Swiss civil law, the Italian penal law, and the German commercial law were adopted in 1926. Women began to vote in 1930. By means of the mass media, education, flag saluting, national anthem singing, state parades and non-religious holidays on national anniversaries, attempts were made to socialize the people into becoming patriotic citizens of a secular republic rather than pious members of a Muslim community.

These reforms had a strong impact upon the identity of the people. In the 1960s, to the structured survey question of "How do you see yourselves. . .," 50.3 percent of the workers in a textile factory responded that they saw themselves as "Turks" and 37.5 percent as "Muslims."<sup>8</sup> A nationwide survey carried out during the same decade, found that nationalism as a characteristic of the Turkish identity was stronger than religion.<sup>9</sup> In a nationwide survey in 1994, 69 percent of those interviewed identified themselves as "Turks," 21 percent as "Muslim Turks," and four percent as "Muslims." Another four percent said they were "Kurds," and the remaining two percent revealed other identities.<sup>10</sup>

The reforms in question also had a strong impact on the cognitive secularization of the people. In 1964, villagers no longer viewed a nearby town or even a city as "a

7. Unless otherwise indicated, the following account of the secularist socialization of Turks draws mostly upon earlier studies by Metin Heper, such as "Islam, Polity and Society in Turkey: A Middle Eastern Perspective," *The Middle East Journal* 35, no. 3 (Summer 1981), pp. 350–58. See also Howard A. Reed, "Atatürk's Secularizing Legacy and the Continuing Vitality of Islam in Republican Turkey," in Cyriac K. Pullapilly, ed., *Islam in the Contemporary World* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Cross Roads Press, 1980).

8. Şerif Mardin, *Din ve İdeoloji* (Religion and Ideology) (Ankara: Sevinç Matbaası, 1969), p. 132.

9. Frederick Frey, "Socialization to National Identification Among Turkish Peasants," *Journal of Politics* 30, no. 4 (1968), pp. 963–65.

10. Reported in *Milliyet* (Istanbul), 2 February 1994.

conglomerate of humanity profaned by infidels.”<sup>11</sup> A 1969 study found that, among the migrant employees at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, the frequency of religious practice was only weakly correlated with the belief that religion should not be separated from politics.<sup>12</sup> In a 1986 survey, only seven percent of a national sample approved of a statement that the country should be ruled by *shari’a* (Islamic law).<sup>13</sup> And in 1996, in Konya, one of the most religiously conservative cities in Turkey, an Islamic school that offered intensive religious instruction, together with an English-language curriculum, owed its popularity to its English-language instruction rather than to its teaching of Islam. The school received fewer applicants than the city’s other foreign-language schools that did not offer religious instruction.<sup>14</sup> In the aftermath of the 1995 national elections, a reporter from *The Economist* sent his magazine the following observation from Kayseri, a mid-Anatolian city: “From the . . . RP people in the town hall, when you mention the praise for Iran recently uttered by Mr. Erbakan, all you get is a strained smile.”<sup>15</sup>

#### ERBAKAN AND THE REFAH PARTY

Erbakan and many of his associates are not clergymen, but have professional or business backgrounds. Erbakan is a professor of engineering. He is certainly not an Islamic thinker.<sup>16</sup> It is even claimed that Erbakan’s and some of his close associates’ knowledge of Islam leaves much to be desired.<sup>17</sup> He has proven himself to be a perceptive politician, and understands the problems of the Turkish rural migrants in a society undergoing rapid change. Migrants to the cities have been subjected to the contemptuous behavior of the more sophisticated urbanites, they have lost their traditional sources of support and their sense of identity, and they have had to face major economic difficulties due in part to a nearly three digit rate of inflation since the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> Erbakan and his colleagues have offered a prescription for the ailments of the poor expressed in a religious idiom, *Adil Düzen* (Just Order). Yet, a 1994 survey indicated that only one-third of the RP’s voters voted for the party primarily because it was an Islamic party.<sup>19</sup>

Mehmet Geyikdag, a Turkish scholar, has identified a significant characteristic of Turkish politics which helps to explain the RP’s recent success at the polls:

11. Peter Suzuki, “Encounters with Istanbul: Urban Peasants and Village Peasants,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 5, no. 2 (1964), p. 213.

12. Ned Levine, “Value Orientations among Migrants in Ankara, Turkey: Case Study,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 8, nos. 1–2 (1973), p. 58.

13. İlter Turan, “Religion and Political Culture in Turkey,” in Richard Tapper, ed., *Islam in Modern Turkey* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), p. 55.

14. *New York Times*, 16 January 1996.

15. *The Economist*, 17 February 1996.

16. Ruşen Çakır, *Ne Şariat Ne Demokrasi: Refah Partisini Anlamak* (Neither Shari’a Nor Democracy: To Understand the Prosperity Party) (Istanbul: Metiş, 1994), pp. 127–28.

17. Mümtaz’er Türköne, *Modernleşme, Laiklik ve Demokrasi* (Modernization, Secularism and Democracy) (Ankara: Ark, 1994), pp. 3–4.

18. Ali Yaşar Sarıbay, *Postmodernite, Sivil Toplum ve İslam* (Postmodernity, Civil Society and Islam) (Istanbul: İletişim, 1994), p. 207.

19. Reported in *Nokta* (Istanbul), 26 June – 2 July 1994.

As far as the majority of people are concerned, they are inclined for the party that manipulates religion as long as they feel that the competing parties are the same in other respects. However, if a relatively secularist party looks more promising in the economic sphere, the majority of the voters are likely to vote for it rather than the less secularist party which manipulated religion but whose economic policy does not look promising to the voter.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1995 national elections, the secular parties, including the ones on the left, did not offer the electorate well-thought-out and persuasive policy packages. To make things worse, the mainstream secular political parties were perceived as immersed in corruption—in particular the TPP and the Motherland Party—or as engaged in endless squabbles—in particular the new Republican People's Party.<sup>21</sup> Some members of the secularist intelligentsia were constantly engaged in de-legitimizing the political regime by trying to belittle such key institutions as the military, the National Security Council, the Council of Higher Education, the Presidency, and the Parliament, and this too played into the hands of Erbakan and his colleagues.

It should also be noted that before the 1995 national elections, the RP essentially functioned not as a political party but as a social welfare agency for the needy.<sup>22</sup> It obtained appointments for people at hospitals, and other public service agencies. Through the municipalities it controlled,<sup>23</sup> the party also distributed coal, clothing, soup, and food to the needy.<sup>24</sup>

On the eve of the 1995 elections, numerous party activists, at the grass-roots level, kept track of every voter deemed critical to the party's victory. They visited each voter before the elections, and, on election day, provided transportation to and from the polling stations for those who needed it.<sup>25</sup> In its efforts to garner votes, the RP was also supported by a complex network of Islamist economic ventures which included holding companies, chambers of commerce and industry, trade unions, women and youth groups, some 50 publishers, 45 radio stations, 19 television channels, and hundreds of video and cassette producers.<sup>26</sup> The RP mobilized all these groups and organizations, offered the electorate some moral and material support, and used its Islamist ideology to explain what was fundamentally wrong with the country.<sup>27</sup> The ideology in question, however, did not offer well-thought-out measures to grapple with the ills the country faced.

20. Mehmet Yaşar Geyikdag, *Political Parties in Turkey: The Role of Islam* (New York: Praeger, 1984), p. 119.

21. See Henri Barkey, "Turkey, Islamic Politics, and the Kurdish Question," *World Policy Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1996), p. 45.

22. Ali Bayramoğlu, "Tahlillere Dikkat," (It is Necessary to be Careful about the Analyses Offered), *Yeni Yüzyıl* (Istanbul), 4 January 1996.

23. After the 1994 local elections, the RP controlled 28 provincial-level municipalities, eight of which were large metropolitan municipalities, including those of Istanbul and Ankara.

24. Çakır, *Ne Şeriat Ne Demokrasi*, p. 185.

25. Interview with Professor Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, in *Cumhuriyet* (Istanbul), 8 November 1994. Also see, Barkey, "Turkey, Islamic Politics, and the Kurdish Question," p. 45.

26. The numbers of publishers, radio stations, and television channels are as of January 1995. See *Milliyet*, 6 January 1995.

27. Sencer Ayata, "Patronage, Party and the State: The Politicization of Islam in Turkey," *The Middle East Journal* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1996), p. 52.

Since the mid-1990s, the RP has attained political legitimacy and, in turn, has adopted the procedural rules of democracy, i.e. those designating the constitutional means of competing for and holding political office.<sup>28</sup> The party has also adopted an increasingly more secular platform and political strategies aimed at expanding its political base of support. This new approach was the result of a strategic decision the party took in its Fourth Grand Congress, in October 1993, to open up the party to new groups in the electorate.<sup>29</sup>

This decision was a victory for the so-called *Yenilikçiler* (innovators) in the RP led by Istanbul's metropolitan mayor Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a likely successor to Erbakan.<sup>30</sup> Erdoğan may be regarded as a 'republican Muslim.' While for years Erbakan has shunned the Republican Day ceremonies, Erdoğan has taken part at those ceremonies in front of Atatürk's statue in Istanbul's Taksim square.<sup>31</sup> Erdoğan can also be considered a 'liberal Muslim.' Although, in the 1970s, the Milli Selamet Partisi (National Salvation Party, NSP)<sup>32</sup> minister of interior, Oguzhan Asiltürk, made serving alcoholic drinks in all restaurants conditional on obtaining a special permit,<sup>33</sup> Erdoğan recently commented on this issue as follows: "...because of our belief, we cannot serve alcoholic drinks in the restaurants run by our municipality. We cannot, however, prevent others from serving such drinks, even in those places they have rented from us."<sup>34</sup> Erbakan once said that those who did not financially support the *jihad* (holy war) could not be considered true Muslims.<sup>35</sup> Erdoğan, on the other hand, observed: "The New Year is celebrated by the secularists and not by us. . . . I cannot, however, say to the secularists that they are not Muslims just because they celebrate the New Year. Only Allah is entitled to bring in a verdict on that matter."<sup>36</sup> Finally, one can describe Erdoğan as a 'democratic Muslim.' In the same interview he pointed out that in the theaters run by the municipality, plays were going to be staged that reflected "our own people's values."<sup>37</sup> He was thereupon asked by the interviewer, "But are you not the mayor of all Istanbulites?"<sup>38</sup> Erdoğan responded rhetorically: "Am I not supposed to have my own beliefs and principles? Have I not been elected mayor because of those beliefs and principles? As an elected person, am I not obliged to respect the preferences of the people who cast their votes for me?"<sup>39</sup>

28. Jeremy Salt, "Nationalism and the Rise of Muslim Sentiment in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 1 (1995), pp. 13–25.

29. Çakır, *Ne Şariat Ne Demokrasi*, p. 120.

30. Erbakan is not popular with the electorate, as a 1994 poll revealed: only one percent of the party's voters voted for the party because of Erbakan. See, inter alia, *Nokta*, 22–28 May 1994.

31. *Tempo* (Istanbul), 18 January 1995.

32. The NSP was established in October 1972 by Erbakan after his NOP was outlawed in May 1971 because it was an Islamist party. The NSP was shut down by the military in October 1981.

33. Ali Yaşar Sarıbay, *Türkiye'de Modernleşme, Din ve Parti Politikası: Milli Selamet Partisi Örnek Olayı* (Modernity, Religion and Party Policy in Turkey: The Case of the National Salvation Party) (Istanbul: Alan Yayıncılık, 1985), p. 190.

34. *Hürriyet* (Istanbul), 8 January 1995. Author's translation.

35. Oktay Ekşi, "Erbakan Budur," (This is Erbakan), *Hürriyet*, 21 July 1995.

36. *Tempo*, 18 January 1995. Author's translation.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

The RP's Ankara metropolitan mayor, Melih Gökçek, said in 1991, "If the majority of the people wish to live as Muslims you have no option but to allow them to lead such lives."<sup>40</sup> This remark was made in response to the question, "Would you set up a state based on the shari'a?"<sup>41</sup> Two decades earlier, Erbakan, too, had pointed out that a Turkey where the shari'a was the primary source of law, was "theoretically possible" and that on this matter the Turkish parliament would be the judge.<sup>42</sup>

Drawing upon these and similar statements, a student of Islam in Turkey, Ruşen Çakır, concluded that RP members want a "theo-democracy," i.e. they wish to introduce theocracy through democratic means, although, that may be less than the full implementation of the shari'a.<sup>43</sup> According to Çakır, the moderate Islamists long for a Muslim society but not for an Islamic state: they do not aim at a constitutional and legal de-secularization of the state.<sup>44</sup> Earlier, Lewis, too, had predicted that "There is [in Turkey] little or no prospect of any restoration of Islamic law even in such basic matters as marriage or divorce."<sup>45</sup>

### THE RELIGIOUS BROTHERHOODS

In the second half of the 1990s, the leaders of the influential religious brotherhoods, movements, and sects, and the leading Muslim intellectuals appear to be fairly well integrated into the Turkish secular democratic state and display even more moderate views than the RP. During the early decades of this century, there had been a tacit agreement between the leading religious brotherhoods, such as the Nakşibendis and the Nurus, and the secularist political parties that if the political parties left the religious brotherhoods alone, they would in turn give their political support to the parties. Later, the brotherhoods gradually took on a more activist role by acting as lobbies for the economic ventures established by Islamist groups in such sectors as textiles, construction and banking.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, the religious leaders of these brotherhoods, movements, and sects became symbolic heads, and the leadership cadres of those economic ventures became the laymen.

Starting in the late 1960s, the brotherhoods began playing a significant role in the formation of political parties. The Nakşibendis and Nurus encouraged the establishment of the NOP and the NSP, respectively. The RP was founded with the consent of the *shaykh* (head) of the Nakşibendi order, the late Mehmet Zahit Kotku. The Sufi orders competed for influence with center-right political parties, such as the Adalet Partisi (Justice Party) and the TPP. They supported the RP's view of secularism, but withdrew their support from the religiously oriented political parties when they concluded that these parties threatened the future of democracy in Turkey. Brotherhoods figured that the parties' frequent challenge of the Atatürkist state tradition could prompt a military intervention

40. *Yeni Yüzyıl*, 8 January 1991. Author's translation.

41. Çakır, *Ne Şeriat Ne Demokrasi*, p. 124.

42. Sarıbay, *Türkiye'de Modernleşme, Din ve Parti Politikası*, p. 11.

43. Çakır, *Ne Şeriat Ne Demokrasi*, pp. 127–30.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Lewis, "Modern Turkey Revisited," p. 15.

46. Ayata, "Patronage, Party, and the State: The Politicization of Islam in Turkey," p. 45.



from which they would suffer most. For instance, several religious orders withdrew their support from the RP starting in the early 1990s, and even sent word to the National Security Council that they had terminated their link with that party.

During recent decades, two Nakşibendi shaykhs, Kotku and his successor, the present Shaykh Mahmud Esad Coşan, a professor of theology and the late Kotku's son-in-law, have disapproved of the fundamentalist interpretations of Islam by some radical brotherhoods. They have adopted an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary line on the Islamization of everyday life in Turkey.<sup>47</sup> The Nakşibendis do not view the state as their number one enemy.<sup>48</sup> When Erbakan made one of his "imprudent" remarks such as the one about not supporting the jihad, Shaykh Kotku complained: "At this time we should go on teaching Islam in Turkey. What is this talk about jihad? In any case, jihad is waged against the infidel."<sup>49</sup>

At one point, Shaykh Kotku gave the impression that he subscribed to theo-democracy; he stated that Islamists should give priority to reconstituting a Muslim community that "in time would inevitably lead to an Islamic state."<sup>50</sup> Yet, as Şerif Mardin has argued, Kotku's choice of Shaykh Coşan as both his son-in-law and his successor, attests to his extraordinary sensitivity to modernity,<sup>51</sup> which would not sit well with a theo-democracy.

Next in importance to the Nakşibendis has been the Nurcu movement led by Saidi Nursi. A Kurd, he led the Kurdish rebellions in Turkey that continued intermittently from 1925 to 1938, while simultaneously preaching peace and stability in society and the polity. Early in his vocation, Nursi had a religio-modernistic goal: to save the students attending secular schools from atheism, and the students attending *madrasas* (religious seminaries) from fanaticism.<sup>52</sup> According to Safa Mürsel, a leading figure in the Nurcu movement, Nursi always preached realism, scientific methodology, objectivity, and an evolutionary worldview.<sup>53</sup> Nurcus came up with a rather sophisticated analysis of Islam,<sup>54</sup> promoted the idea of science above faith, and became receptive to republicanism and secularism.<sup>55</sup>

Two groups emerged from the Nurcu movement. The first was the Yeni Asya (New Asia) group, which was established in the early 1960s and supported democracy. In 1990, it stopped supporting the center-right TPP, because it claimed that its leader, then Prime

47. Ruşen Çakir, *Ayet ve Slogan* (Verse and Ideology) (Istanbul: Metiş Yayinlari, 1990), p. 23.

48. Ibid.

49. Şahin Alpay, "Görünmeyen Üniversite," (Unseen University), *Milliyet*, 11 November 1995. In Islam, jihad is also waged against the apostate.

50. Sarıbay, *Postmodernite, Sivil Toplum ve Islam*, p. 66.

51. Şerif Mardin, "The Nakşibendi Order in Turkish History," in Tapper, ed., *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 134.

52. Çakir, *Ayet ve Slogan*, p. 78.

53. Ibid., pp. 82–83.

54. Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Saidi Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989).

55. Paul Dumont, "Islam as a Factor of Change and Revival in Modern Turkey," in Sabri Akural, ed., *Turkic Culture: Continuity and Change* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Turkish Studies 6, 1987), pp. 8–9.

Minister Demirel, who kept challenging the Atatürkian bureaucratic-military establishment, was a threat to democracy in Turkey.<sup>56</sup>

The second and most prominent Nurcu group is the Fethullahcıs. Its leader, Fethullah Gülen, a former civil servant, prayer leader and preacher, expressed some very liberal views in a newspaper interview in 1995:

We do not support every government. But if someone has been elected to political office we should conduct ourselves toward that person as the people in the advanced Western countries do. In those countries, the people think that those occupying the highest governmental offices are the symbols of their countries' standing in the international community. This is, for instance, the case in the United States. The state is very important. Its absence creates anarchy.<sup>57</sup>

Gülen also discussed democracy in his interview: "I have always urged the citizens who came to pray in my mosque, to vote in the elections. I have told them this is the duty of every citizen."<sup>58</sup> Gülen stated that social harmony was very important: "I do not wish to put on the spot some parliamentarians, bureaucrats, and the like who are otherwise good Muslims. Let us have sympathy for both the practicing and the non-practicing Muslims."<sup>59</sup>

### ISLAMIST INTELLECTUALS

During the last two decades, a group of moderate Islamist intellectuals has risen to prominence. Many of these have had an extensive secular education, know one or two Western or Middle Eastern languages, have a fairly good knowledge of Western literature, philosophy and/or social history, and write in contemporary Turkish.<sup>60</sup> They follow closely the trends in Western political thought,<sup>61</sup> and live in major metropolitan centers such as Istanbul and Ankara. They keep in close contact with moderately secular intellectuals, with whom they have frequent public debates. Their newly acquired respectability, in the eyes of the moderate secular intelligentsia, contributes to their attracting a considerable audience among practicing Muslims.<sup>62</sup>

These Islamist intellectuals have developed models of a pluralist Muslim community. One such model has been formulated by Ali Bulaç, who, according to a 1993 survey, has a significant influence on the practicing Muslim university students in Turkey.<sup>63</sup> Bulaç

56. Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan*, pp. 92, 94.

57. The following account of Gülen's views on different topics draws upon two extensive interviews published in *Hürriyet*, 23–28 January 1995, and *Sabah*, 23–30 January 1995. Author's translation.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Michael E. Meeker, "The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey," in Tapper, ed., *Islam in Modern Turkey*, pp. 190–92; and Binnaz Toprak, "Islamist Intellectuals: Revolt Against Industry and Technology," in Metin Heper, Ayşe Öncü, and Heinz Kramer, eds., *Turkey and the West: Changing Political and Cultural Identities* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), p. 244.

61. Nilüfer Göle, *Modern Mahrem: Medeniyet ve Ortünme* (Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veil) (Istanbul: Metiş, 1991), p. 108.

62. Meeker, "The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey," p. 189; and Toprak, "Islamist Intellectuals," p. 244.

63. Reported in *Nokta*, 22–28 August 1993.

was influenced by the Medina Document, the seventh century agreement between the Prophet Muhammad and the Jews and polytheists in Mecca. Basing himself on that document, Bulaç has developed a model of a Muslim community in which different “social blocs” have “religious, cultural, and legal autonomy.”<sup>64</sup> Bulaç recognizes the fact that the Turks had an Ottoman empire in which different ethnic and sectarian groups were successfully accommodated. At the same time, he believes that the founders of the Republic were right in doing away with Turkey’s Ottoman heritage because they cleared the way for a return to a pristine Islam. That form of Islam, according to Bulaç, is neither theocratic nor “totalitarian.”

Bulaç notes that in the Ottoman Empire and in Muslim countries the rulers chose to be “Allah’s caliphs.” In the process, they came to resemble the Catholic clergy, who monopolized the interpretation of God’s will and who also adopted a hostile attitude towards those who did not profess allegiance to their faith.<sup>65</sup> Bulaç points out that in pristine Islam, it is the religious community, rather than the clergy or the political leadership, that has the last word. In a Lockean fashion, the religious community designates the rulers, and makes a pact to obey them as long as they act within the tenets of Islam and in accordance with the preferences of the religious community. Furthermore, within the religious community, the individual has the right to interpret his religion,<sup>66</sup> and therefore, according to Bulaç, should be free to decide how and even whether to practice it at all.

Bulaç also underlines the need for harmony in society and the polity. He praises Sufism for having facilitated the transition from rural to urban life by providing migrants with a new identity. Bulaç believes that Islam could be instrumental in settling the Kurdish question, a view shared by the RP.<sup>67</sup>

Islamist intellectuals have not, however, come up with a specific blueprint for the transformation of present-day Turkish society into the pluralist communities described in some of their utopian models. Like the leaders of the RP and the Islamist brotherhoods, movements, and sects, the Islamist intellectuals give priority to promoting an Islamic consciousness among the masses.<sup>68</sup> They discuss the need to struggle in order to establish an Islamist order, but emphasize that the struggle is political.<sup>69</sup> In any case, their worldviews can hardly be reconciled with that of an Islamic state.

One of the prominent Islamist intellectuals, Rasim Özdenören, views Islam as a set of non-dogmatic beliefs and practices,<sup>70</sup> and does not believe that a religious community can be created by resorting to force.<sup>71</sup> Although he does not suggest that the West should

64. Ali Bulaç, *İslam ve Demokrasi - Teokrasi, Totaliterizm* (Islam and Democracy - Theocracy, Totalitarianism) (İstanbul: Beyan, 1993), p. 11.

65. It is not clear from the text whether Bulaç is referring to a particular period in time or to the Catholic clergy today.

66. Bulaç, *İslam ve Demokrasi*, pp. 96–97, 106–107, 109, 138, 164, 165.

67. The interview with Bulaç reported in *Aktüel* (İstanbul), 3 March 1994.

68. Toprak, “Islamist Intellectuals,” p. 249.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Meeker, “The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey,” p. 207.

71. Rasim Özdenören, *Yeniden İnanmak* (Believing Again) (İstanbul: Nehir, 1986), p. 120.

be emulated, he nevertheless recognizes the West's achievements,<sup>72</sup> and argues that a Muslim should not criticize the conduct of those who do not believe in Islam.<sup>73</sup>

Another well-known Islamist intellectual, İsmet Özel, does not approve of attributing absolute authority to the Quran and the *hadith* (Prophet's traditions) because "it makes one unable to reconcile oneself with the non-Islamic values of the society one lives in."<sup>74</sup> Özel admires Western civilization because it has been able to adapt to and absorb various worldviews,<sup>75</sup> and has a high regard for the West because it has developed autonomous institutions that safeguard different cultural traditions.<sup>76</sup>

### SECULARISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ISLAMISTS

The radical secularists in Turkey view as "irrational" virtually any kind of preoccupation with Islam. They perceive Islam as the antonym of enlightenment, and have adopted a hostile attitude towards it. The day after the 1995 national elections, the lead editorial in *Hürriyet*, one of Turkey's three national dailies, observed: "The Turkish electorate, with a four-fifths majority, made it clear that it wants to live in an Atatürkian Turkey and not in a world of perceived bigotry and fanaticism."<sup>77</sup> As the radical secularists see a zero-sum relationship between secularism and Islam, they reject the idea of a reconciliation between the two. They refuse to enter into a dialogue with the Islamists and have a condescending attitude toward them. This attitude has contributed to the Islamists' occasional straying away from moderation, as when Erbakan made an off-the-cuff remark in April 1994 about "the religiously-oriented coming to power even by shedding blood if necessary."<sup>78</sup>

Not only have the radical secularists in Turkey failed to realize the significance of Islam for the people—inter alia, as a source of belief, ethics, identity and/or consolation—but they have also exaggerated the Islamist threat to the Turkish secular democratic state. In Turkey, politics has become a functional alternative to religion: People with grievances have several means of articulating their demands and participating in politics. Furthermore, Islamists are not facing a single party or dictator; they have to compete for power with secular political parties, the bulk of the intelligentsia, a great majority of the people who support constitutional and legal secularization, and, last but not least, the staunchly secular military.

72. Ibid., p. 53.

73. Ibid., p. 72.

74. İsmet Özel, *Üç Mesele: Teknik, Medeniyet, Yabancılaşma* (The Problem: Technique, Civilization and Alienation) (Istanbul: Düşünce, 1978), pp. 6–17.

75. Ibid., p. 48.

76. İsmet Özel, *Waldo Sen Neden Burada Degilsin?* (Waldo, Why Are You Not Here?) (Istanbul: Risale, 1988), p. 32.

77. *Hürriyet*, 25 December 1995. Author's translation.

78. *Hürriyet*, 4 April 1994. Author's translation. Needless to say, Erbakan's occasional forays into militancy cannot be attributed only to the radical secularists' provocative attitudes toward Islam in general and the RP in particular. Erbakan has a tendency sometimes to make outrageous remarks to satisfy the orthodox within the party and among the party's supporters.

Of the various so-called Islamist groups, only the radical Islamists oppose the secular democratic state in Turkey, and they constitute only a small minority among the Islamists. They also do not have a recognized charismatic leader who could be the Turkish, or Sunni, counterpart of Khomeini's Shi'ite *velayat-i fakih* (jurisconsult) who would interpret Allah's will. Furthermore, the radical Islamists are dispersed into a number of relatively marginal Islamist groups, such as the Girişim (Enterprise) group, Büyük Doğu (Grand East) group, Vahdet (Unity) group, and Hizbullahis (the party of God), which are not linked by any unifying central structure.<sup>79</sup> Finally, the radical Islamists have not been able to develop their own indigenous Islamic ideology, but have had to draw upon the ideas of Islamist intellectuals in other countries. They consequently have become isolated from their own society.<sup>80</sup> The Hizbullahis, for instance, basically adopted the Iranian Shi'ite model, although there is no comparable hierarchy of clergy in Sunni Turkey. When it became clear that the Iranian *ayatollahs* (clergymen) wanted to export a Shi'ite revolution to Turkey (and elsewhere), the Hizbullahis as Sunnis found themselves in an embarrassing situation and were marginalized as a radical Islamist group.<sup>81</sup>

It is not, therefore, surprising that many of those who fear an Islamic revival in Turkey first think of the RP and not the radical Islamist groups. Yet, for a long time now, the RP members have been functioning within Turkey's democratic secular order. What they wish to change is the particular conception of secularism that the founders of the Republic instituted in Turkey's constitutions and laws—the separation of religion from politics and the control of religion by the state so that it would not develop retrogressively and challenge the secularist democratic principles upon which the Republic was established. The RP argues that, in true secularism, not only is the state autonomous from religion, but religion, too, is autonomous from the state. The RP points out, for example, that in a genuine democracy, the state cannot prevent female students from attending classes if they cover their heads in a Muslim manner. The RP wants the state to leave religion alone. It insists that the following paragraph of Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution be abrogated:

Nobody can base even if partially the social, economic, political, and legal foundations of the state on religious norms and nobody can exploit or misuse religion, religious feelings, and the things considered sacred by religion for one's political or personal ends.

In its stead the RP wants to add a new paragraph to Article 24 which would stipulate that all persons have the right to lead their lives in accordance with their own religious beliefs. At least in their public discourse, RP members do not challenge the secular premises of the state, but they point out that Article 24 as it now stands is in conflict with the freedom of conscience also guaranteed in Turkey's constitution.

The radical secularists, comprising the majority of the intelligentsia, including a number of leading journalists, believe this stand on the part of the RP is a challenge to the

79. Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan*, p. 290.

80. Türköne, *Modernleşme, Laiklik ve Demokrasi*, p. 9.

81. Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan*, p. 157. The Alevi minority in Turkey have opted for a secular regime as a means to guarantee their security against any Sunni repression against them.

secular premises of the state. They think that the RP is concealing its long-term intention of establishing an Islamic state in Turkey. When the now defunct NSP was a member of the coalition governments in the 1970s, it had indeed filled the positions in the ministries it controlled with its Islamist supporters. The radical secularists point to this as evidence of the Refahis' intention to set up an Islamic state in Turkey. Some have argued that the RP should be stopped, even by non-democratic means if this becomes absolutely necessary.

In contrast, the moderate secularists, comprising many members of the center-right political parties and a minority within the intelligentsia, recognize the significance of religion for the people. They are aware of the dynamics behind the recent success of the RP at the polls, and they accept that the RP has the right to compete for political office and, if elected, to participate in a coalition government, or even to form a government alone. The thought of the latter eventuality, however, does make them rather nervous. Some among the moderate secularists, too, fear that further Islamization of the society and the polity may lead to the eventual establishment of an Islamic state in Turkey, and that the RP may be instrumental in such a development. Yet they tend to give the benefit of the doubt to the RP and refrain from assuming a hostile attitude toward it.

The moderate secularists' tolerant stance toward the RP may contribute to the amelioration of relations between the secularists and the religiously-oriented and to greater flexibility on the part of the moderate Islamists. In fact, when the RP won a plurality of votes in the 1995 elections, Erbakan pointed out that he and his party would not make the mistakes they had committed in the past, and were prepared to play a constructive role in cooperation with other parties to solve Turkey's problems.<sup>82</sup> He also moderated his stance on a number of issues stating, for instance, that he was not, in principle, against the Customs Union Agreement with the European Union, which he had earlier opposed.<sup>83</sup> In the wake of the June 1996 RP-TPP coalition, the RP accepted the coalition protocol stating that the coalition government looked favorably upon a free market economy and the tariff union with the European Union,<sup>84</sup> and supported the security forces against terrorism, as well as all of Turkey's international treaties, including the one with Israel.<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Looking at the extent to which democracy has been consolidated and Islam has become reincorporated into the social, economic and political fabric of Turkey in the 1990s, one could make an optimistic prognosis about the relationship between democracy and Islam in that country. One might even argue that the interactive relationship between democracy and Islam has taken on a new and unexpected twist. Having long been subjected to the dominance of the radical secularists' perception of a zero-sum relation-

82. *Sabah*, 27 December 1995; *Yeni Yüzyıl*, 6 January 1996.

83. *Ibid.*

84. *Yeni Yüzyıl*, 3 July 1996.

85. *Ibid.*

ship between their worldview and Islam, the moderate Islamists, who champion the freedom of conscience, may now be instrumental in moving Turkish democracy in a more liberal direction. Their success in this regard may contribute to a softening of the hostile attitude of the radical secularists whose conception of democracy has often excluded not only the radical but also the moderate Islamists. The latter may now emerge as effective proponents of social harmony and consensus politics, not as the result of religious motivations, but because of pragmatic considerations of the situation that they find themselves in vis-à-vis the radical secularists. If the moderate Islamists only seek freedom of conscience and not constitutional and legal de-secularization, they could make a real contribution to Turkish democracy. The critical question is whether the moderate Islamists are interested in a theo-democracy, or in a liberal democracy, that is, a secular democratic state where freedom of conscience is safeguarded and both religion and the state are separate and autonomous.

Erbakan and some members of the old guard within the RP as well as some members of the religious brotherhoods, movements, and sects have at times given the impression that they, indeed, had in mind a theo-democracy. It is likely, however, that their statements were made to appease the orthodox within their ranks, and perhaps also to make up for their lack of coherent and persuasive policies on substantive issues. One may assume that Erbakan and his colleagues, as well as the moderate Islamists, are shrewd enough to see that not only the revolutionary but also the evolutionary road to an Islamic state in Turkey is full of obstacles. It is difficult to imagine the moderate Islamists toying with the idea of revolution because they are so well integrated into the secular democratic state and economy, and function successfully in both spheres. Furthermore, the evolutionary path towards an Islamic state depends upon the Islamists' obtaining an electoral majority. In the mid-1990s, even when the Turkish economy was in shambles, when there were claims of widespread corruption within the secular political class, and when both the moderate center-left and center-right political parties had failed to come up with meaningful programs, four-fifths of the electorate still did not opt for the RP. If the secular center-left and the secular center-right had not been divided among themselves, the RP would have been a distant third in the 1995 national elections. Finally, only around seven percent of the voters who cast their votes for the RP in those elections, did so because the latter was a religiously oriented party.<sup>86</sup>

A marriage between Islam and democracy in Turkey can be consummated if the radical secularists stop trying to impose their preferred life-style and set of values upon the Islamists, and if the latter do not attempt to undermine by word or deed the basic tenets of the secular democratic state in Turkey. A critical mediating role may be played by the moderate secularists whose numbers are on the increase. If these conditions obtain, and there is reason to think that they may, the Turks can indeed manage to achieve what Lewis thought they could: "a liberal economy, an open society, and a liberal democratic polity."<sup>87</sup>

86. Reported in *Nokta*, 26 June -2 July 1994.

87. Bernard Lewis, "Modern Turkey Revisited," p. 11.